

# MUNGER AFRICANA



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NOTES

1

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## MUNGER AFRICANA LIBRARY NOTES

February 1971

One Dollar

#1

### EDOUARD MAUNICK: A BLACK MAURITIAN POET SPEAKS

Edouard Maunick is a talented poet and an inspiring speaker. He is also a philosopher of Negritude and a moving force within the black world, particularly with those he terms as "the blacks of the diaspora." He believes, as did the late Malagasy poet, Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo, and the Martiniquian, Aimé Césaire, that in order to realize their history, blacks from the islands must return in their hearts to Africa. However, he does not believe that these island people return empty handed, but rather that they have much to offer both Africa and the rest of the world.

Dr. Maunick's works have been published widely in French. He has been Regents Professor in the Department of French at the University of California in Los Angeles, and works regularly with French radio. His informal and unrevised remarks and his answers to questions in this NOTE were presented in a seminar for students at the California Institute of Technology in October, 1970.

Dr. Maunick discusses intimate details of his early life which he feels were influential in the formation of his present philosophy. He tells of his relations with Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor, giving his views of them as people and also of the importance of their work. His remarks range from his impressions of black power in America to the concepts of pan-Africanism. Throughout his wide variety of topics, Mr. Maunick maintains an impressive poetic flow which clearly conveys the consistency of his beliefs and a passion for his convictions.

JG



I.

I am always very happy, and this is not mere politeness to say that I'm always very happy when I have to meet and talk to the youth of the world and, moreso, the youth from the universities. First of all I must apologize to use the English language, because this is not my language. For 10 years I have been speaking French; I have been writing French for more than 30 years. And when I have to speak English, I have some difficulty because it is not my natural language. But I speak English simply because I've been brought up in an island colonized by the English, and I had to go to English universities. I had to deal with Shakespeare and all sorts of great men that you know of. But when I was a little boy -- as I said last time when I was at Caltech speaking about my island -- and even now, all the persons, the mixed blood people or the black people or the Indians or the Hindus, even the French communities, don't use the English language when they have natural things to say. For example, when I was a boy, when I was hungry or thirsty, I would say in my own Creole language, "Me faim," "me soif," which means "J'ai faim" in French and "j'ai soif," which is nearer to the French language than "I'm hungry" or "I'm thirsty." These are very, very important words to us people who have been poor for so many years and who have been taught the humility of poverty and to accept our own situation.

You students, I understand, are now reading African authors, black authors. And you must know also about these people who are black who belong to Africa though they were not born in Africa. These people have come from very far, not only as far as distance is concerned, but also as far as their own beings are concerned. And what I have to say belongs to this sort of individual who is that man from the islands.

Now, it is very important for you to know about these people because you can miss many things, just as I can miss many things when I meet you. This is very important, when we go all around the world and we can't really be identified by the others. Then we have great difficulty in taking the richness of other people as far as culture and tradition and civilization are concerned. Where do you find Mauritius on most maps? You don't see it. It is usually not there. On almost all the maps of the world, you will not see my little island. We are a pinpoint in the Indian Ocean and that is all. Which means when you meet people and you are from those little islands, those little places, you have always to declare your identity and to speak about yourself. It becomes important to me to tell you who I am, and who Mr. Césaire is, and all those people who have worked for the liberation of Africa. I did not say "the independence," because I don't believe that Africa is independent. There is much to do in Africa in order to be independent, but we have striven for, let's say, a sort of liberation. I believe in liberation; I don't believe in freedom. Freedom is

something I will always fight for, but liberation is something I want now. I must obtain it now.

When I was about seven years old, one day my father came home and he was reading the papers. He looked very dismal and he said just one sentence, like that, he said, "It's a pity, because he was a great man, he was really a great poet, he was a great writer." And I said, "What's the matter?" And he said, "There's a man who has just committed suicide in Madagascar, and he was a very great poet. His name was Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo."

So my father was very dismal and unhappy about the suicide of this man. And later I learned why this man had killed himself, and I was very upset. In fact, Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo committed suicide because he was not given the opportunity, the permission, to leave to go to Paris. A man killed himself because they did not want him to go to the metropolis. What was that metropolis? It was Paris. Since he was a little boy, he went to the French schools, to the European schools. He was taught that his own people were savages, that his language had no great importance, that he had to read and learn those languages of great communication -- one of them being the French language, the most cultured language. So he learned to be noble; whatever nobility he had in him, he had to learn it through learning French. And he began to write, because he had the gift of poetry in him. Instead of writing in his own language and talking about his own people, he wrote great French poetry. Then all of a sudden he became conscious of what he was, and he wrote some half Malagasian poetry and half French poetry. Since he was writing in very good French, he was patted on the shoulders. He was very popular among the French settlers. To the French colonists, he was a good Negro who could write good French.

He was very good by then. And as long as he accepted to remain in his country and write his own poetry in the French language, he was considered to be great. But because he had that culture, because he had read about the universality of what is called French culture and the Occidental world, he wanted to go there. He wanted to touch, to go to the very flesh of that metropolis, and it was then he became the Negro. Then he was the black man who couldn't go there because there was no place for him. So he killed himself. But even when he killed himself, he committed suicide in such a way that he was able to note everything that happened to him while he was dying. And one of the most dismal things about his death is that while he was dying, he wrote, "It is a pity that I'm dying. I'm leaving this world and in the other room on the shelves Rimbaud and Baudelaire are still there. They will live after me." This is something terrible.

I am taking you to the very roots of the problem. If I speak about science, about psychology, about the great trends of international civilization, and put some black pepper in it, it might be of great importance. But it is of paramount importance that we know about this black man who is now in the world everywhere trying to achieve liberation. You are going to hear about this man, you are going to read about this man. And it is very good for you to know about him. Mr. Rabearivelo was not the only one in the world to live this sort of drama. I think I have lived a part of it. I am going to tell you about my own experience. And if I refer to myself, please take it only because I know my own case, and it is in a way a good illustration of the other cases in the islands of those people who decided to go back to the original tree -- Africa.

## II.

My little island, as I have said, is not on most maps. When I went into the world, I was taught to speak about my country. But how? One of the first things I used to say was not that in Mauritius there are black people. Africans came there. Indians came there. We have the Segar, which is a traditional dance. I did not say that we were very proud to belong to Africa. I was told by my mother, by my teachers, and by other people not to take heed of this side of myself. What I used to say was: "Oh, you don't know Mauritius? You really don't know Mauritius? That is the island where the stepfather of Baudelaire sent him. Baudelaire came to Mauritius. It is the island where the dodo lived, you know." And to others I would say, "Mauritius is the island that was not called Mauritius. It was formerly called 'L'isle de France.'" This was the way I was behaving. I was just that sort of bastard that they wanted me to be in that society.

Was I going to refuse completely the western world? I don't believe in that. I am not the one who is not going to listen to Beethoven because he was a German. I am not going to refuse Picasso because he is European. I am not going to leave old Shakespeare alone. All these people are important. But one of the most important things about me is to learn about my own culture and my own being. What was I doing mile out of time? What have we been doing, we Negroes, we black people from the islands? We have just been having our backs to the sea and looking at the center of the island as being the center of the world. So our being was very restricted. We had that little place, so we had to have a very little and restricted life.

But man is born to be universal, even if he is on a rock in the middle of the ocean. He has to be universal, because the sun is

universal, because the sea is universal, because distance and the world itself are made for man. And not only for one kind of man. Then I read some of Rabearivelo's poetry, and what did I understand from that?

There you stand  
erect and naked  
you are a lime tree and remember;  
but truly you are the child of this fertile shadow  
that feeds on lunar milk;  
slowly you take the shape of a pillar  
on this low wall over which dreams of flowers drift  
and the perfume of a relaxed summer.

To feel, to believe that roots sprout at your feet  
and move and twist themselves like thirsty snakes  
towards some underground source  
or that they clench the sand  
and make you part of it, you, living one,  
unknown tree, unnamed tree  
that develops fruit  
which you must pluck yourself.

Your crown,  
in your hair dishevelled by the wind,  
conceals a nest of transcendant birds,  
and when you will come to sleep in my bed,  
and I will recognize you, my errant brother,  
your touch, your breath, and the odour of your skin  
will provoke the rustling of mysterious winds  
even to the frontiers of sleep.

And I also read this one:

The black glassmaker  
whose countless eyeballs none has ever seen  
whose shoulders none has overlooked,  
that slave all clothed in pearls of glass  
who is strong as Atlas  
and who carries seven skies on his head  
one would think that the vast river of clouds might carry  
him away,  
the river in which his loincloth is already wet.

A thousand particles of glass  
fall from his hands

but rebound towards his brow  
shattered by mountains  
where the winds are born.

And you are witness of his daily suffering  
and of his endless task;  
you watch his thunder riddled agony  
until the battlements of the East re-echo  
the conches of the sea --  
but you pity him no more  
and do not even remember that his sufferings begin again  
each time the sun capsizes.

[Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo: Poems X and  
XVIII from 24 Poems]

Some ten years after my father read to me the news about  
the death of this man, I came over these poems. And I no more wanted  
to tell people that Mauritius was the island where Baudelaire came. I  
wanted to know about the real flesh of this island. What did I do? Instead  
of standing with my back to the sea, I turned my back to the land. I'm  
using here perhaps some lyrical language. Pardon me -- I am a poet.  
I am not held to be somebody else, even when I speak.

Now, I turned my back to the land, I looked to the sea, and  
I saw the horizons. I learned that if I had the chance to cross these horizons,  
the first continent I would meet would be Africa. What was I told all these  
years about Africa? That it was a land where savages lived. Some white  
people came there some 100 years ago and they civilized these people.  
They Christianized these people, because they had only what is called  
"ways," "customs," and "traditions." What did I discover in a short  
time? That very often what is called "ways," "customs," and "traditions"  
is civilization. That their own "ways," "customs," and "traditions"  
they are calling "civilization."

All of us from the islands have to use some insolence, we  
know that. But take care. Please take into consideration that during 300  
years or more, we have had to shut down. The silence of Africa, the  
silence of the black world, is something that you can't realize unless you  
have lived as a part of it. And who are we today, the poets? A good friend  
of mine, after I had published five or six books, took me to one of the top  
poets in Paris. And my name was in the anthologies. And he asked me,  
"Now that you have come to the top, why do you write about black and  
Negritude, etc.? Why don't you write about flowers, love, and holidays?"  
I answered, "I am speaking of those things when I speak of myself and of



my people." There is no difference between what is universal and what is particular. We were taken to be particular people. But we are universal people.

### III.

I learned about Africa. First of all, I learned what the islands were. I learned about it from one of the top writers, thinkers, philosophers, and political men of the black world ever since the world has existed. I believe him to be one, if not the greatest poet, to have written in French. I speak here of Mr. Aimé Césaire, who is Martiniquian. His book, "The Return to my Native Land," is so important. It is one of the books that played a top role in the independence of Africa. Today it is so important it has become dangerous to some of the political heads in Africa, and they have banned this book. Because this book speaks of the man. I am concerned with the individual. And Césaire explains what were the islands:

At the end of the small hours these countries whose  
past is uninscribed on any stone, these roads without  
memory, these winds without a log.

Does that matter?

We shall speak. We shall sing. We shall shout.

Full voice, great voice, you shall be our good and our guide.

[Aimé Césaire: Return to my Native Land]

(I am very sorry not to be able to quote you French-speaking writers because they have not yet been translated. I told the University of California press that I want to work on nine anthologies about the black world. I would like to publish the theater first, then the prose writings, and then the poetry from Africa and from the islands.)

So I learned that Africa existed. Then I began to go into the history of that big continent, and I learned that there was a civilization and that 300 hundred years had not killed it. And the most important thing that all of us learned in our poverty, in our impossibility to go and to read in the schools, was that this country had not disappeared though it had no scripture, no writing. Nothing had been written up to the independence in black Africa. But although everything had gone from mouth to ear, from ear to mouth, the history had been kept alive. And these people came suddenly to the world as human beings.

One of the great themes of colonialism was that we were always begging for something and that we had nothing to give. If the Negritude movement has done something, it is this. We have always been

assaulted with that word of "Negro." In my own family, for example, I have a sister who is like this white girl here. I have a dark complexion because I'm of mixed blood. My sister would call me "Mozambique." This is the nickname they gave me because of my hair and because of my complexion. When I was called "Mozambique," I was ashamed, I was not proud. But I learned through all those people who were writing and trying to teach me who I was, and I picked up that word, "Mozambique." Just as all of us Negroes in the world, when we had decided that we were going to write perhaps in English, surely in French, but we were going to write about our own matter, our own skin, our own soul. We were going to show the world. We were going to tell what is "Negritude." That word "Negro" was no more an insult to us. We called ourselves "Negroes." We wanted the world to know what in fact was "Negro." Before, when you called a man "Negro," you were not aware of who he was really. Now we are going to show you who he is. He is a man who has a country, who has a continent, who has a history, who has a civilization. And now that we are in what is called "the modern world," when we come to the concert of nations, when we come to the banquet of the universe, we no more want to be those who are only begging for something. It is what Senghor called "La civilisation du donner et du recevoir." Today we are living in a time of give and take, which means when we come to the world, we say, "We have something to give you."

What have we to give? Machines? No. We were deprived of our diamonds in Kimberley and Bloemfontein, you know that. We have built many great cities as a result of this. We built New York, we built Belgium, although we weren't there. What would Belgium be without the Congolese mines? And yet it is said everywhere that Africa is a very poor country. It is the same with our civilization. When we prepared the first Negro World Festival in Dakar, we discovered that we were very poor -- all our masks were in Europe, the United States, everywhere. We had to write letters and sign bonds to recover these things and show them to our own people. There were ten masks in the Museum of Dakar, and from the outside we collected 325 of them.

These masks are, for example, a little thing that people today collect all around the world. We are a dynamic people. People everywhere collect African material and African art. I am very sorry to have to say it, but there is no such thing as African art. These things are our daily world life. When you use a calabash to carry water and you take this calabash and paint it and carve it for everyday use, it is not art, it is part of life. Art was in life, it wasn't something exterior to it. I was standing at the Museum in Dakar with two of my great French friends who were poets in Paris. And they were looking at the masks and they were giving all sorts of interpretations to these masks. And I told them



seat he tried to abandon his gigantic legs and his starved boxer's trembling hands. And everything had left him, was leaving him. His nose was like a peninsula off its moorings; even his negritude was losing its colour through the effects of a perpetual tanner's bleach. And the tanner was Poverty. A great sudden long-eared bat whose claw-marks on that face were scarred, scabby islands. Or perhaps Poverty was a tireless workman fashioning some deformed cartridge. You could see clearly how the industrious malevolent thumb had modelled the lump of the forehead, pierced two tunnels -- parallel and disturbing -- through the nose, drawn out the disproportion of the upper lip, and by a masterstroke of caricature had planed, polished, varnished the smallest, neatest little ears in all creation.

He was an ungainly Negro without rhythm or measure. A Negro whose eyes rolled with bloodshot weariness. A Negro without shame, and his big smelly toes sniggered in the deep gaping lair of his shoes.

Poverty, it has to be said, had taken great pains to finish him off.

She had hollowed the eye socket and painted it with a cosmetic of dust and rheum.

She had stretched the empty space between the solid hinge of the jaws and the bone of an old, worn cheek. On this she had planted the shiny little bristles of several days' beard. She had maddened the heart and bent the back.

And the whole thing added up perfectly to a hideous Negro, a peevish Negro, a melancholy Negro, a slumped Negro, hands folded as in prayer upon a knotty stick.

A Negro shrouded in an old, threadbare jacket. A Negro who was comical and ugly, and behind me women giggled as they looked at him.

He was COMICAL AND UGLY.

COMICAL AND UGLY, for a fact.

I sported a great smile of complicity. . . .

My cowardice rediscovered!

[ Césaire: Return to my Native Land ]

We learned not to look this way. But even in the world, people would encourage us to look at the Negro as being a very disturbing thing. In a book of mine, without doing away completely with the western civilization to which I owe many things, I wrote a line of poetry in which I

said, "I prefer to be Negro." My own sister came to visit me in Paris, and she said to me, "This is a fantastic work. But why have you chosen to say that you were a Negro? Since when are we Negroes?" Am I putting too big a stress on this fact? We had to go back to it because we had to learn about ourselves. I'm repeating myself, but this is very important. How can we go to the world and try to be in the world, to identify ourselves with the world, if we don't really know about ourselves?

I read that in the kingdom of Dahomey once there was a great king. His name was Gezo. When he was discarded from the throne by his stepbrother, his mother, the queen, was sold as a slave to Brazil. When you learn about Africa, you will see that the woman there is very important. And the queen-mother was the one who stored all the traditions, all the riches of the people, in her mind. So she was sent as a slave to Brazil along with many other slaves. What did that woman do? Cry from bereavement? Stay in a prostrated attitude? No! When the night came, she began to sing songs, and suddenly the other black people who were there discovered that these songs had a special significance. She explained the meaning of the songs and she taught the songs to the other slaves. Her son came back to the throne, and she was bought back to Africa. I said not brought back, but bought back to Africa. She died there with her son. I have been at the tomb of the son. And you know what the mother of King Gezo did? If today in Brazil you hear about the macumba, and if in Haiti you hear about the voodoo, it is because that woman came to Brazil as a slave. She had something to teach. People do not know ordinarily about the voodoo. It is really a great, great thing because people have lived for centuries through these rituals.

My mother once told me, "It is very important for you to learn the violin and to learn the piano." But all the time I wanted to play the banjo and the guitar and the bongo. And I wanted to know why I preferred these things. When I came to speak, when I came to write, what was the sort of writing I was going to adopt? Where would I be most true? A fisherman, a man in the streets, a black man, finally taught me. One morning I was in the fishing village, and the nets had been set, and at about 1 p.m. I asked, "Should we go now to the nets and bring the fishes back?" The fisherman was from Africa, and had been born a slave. He had his own way of saying things. He did not say, "At sunset we will go and look for the nets." Instead he said, "No, when the sun will go and drink the sea, we shall go and take the nets." The sun to him, you see, was living, was human. It is the importance of the word, the importance of the image, the importance of the symbol.

You have heard that the black people are very talkative;



"bavard" -- in French we say that. "You Negroes -- you are always speaking, speaking, talking, talking." People don't realize that we have been shutting down for centuries. And what were we doing during those centuries? We were building, for instance, the Congo for the Belgians. Fourteen thousand people were killed while building the Congo railroad. There was too much sun, and gang after gang was sent in. When one gang died, another gang took it up, until they reached the sea. What were we doing during those three centuries? We were just inside of ourselves, organizing our soul. We were storing soul in such a way that if the world comes to the point of missing soul, we will have soul to give to the world. And when I said that we are living in an age of offer and take, this is what we come to the world to give: an instinctive way of living. I don't agree with Mr. Senghor when he says that instinct is black and reason is white. I will not cut in the butter with such a knife. But I believe that we have some sort of language we can share.

On the TV I saw Bambok, the great hundred yards runner from Martinique or Guadeloupe, who took part in the Olympic games and who is taken to be a French athlete. He was being interviewed by a big French sports reporter on TV. And the reporter asked, "How do you black people win the race?" Bambok replied, "I go to the starting block, the man shoots, and I run." The reporter said, "You don't understand my question. What is it that you do to win a race?" And Bambok said, "I've just told you. I go to the starting block, the man shoots, and I hear the bang, and I run and win the race." Is there some more Cartesian explanation as to how the black man runs?

I was invited in Los Angeles to a soul meeting. I tell you they did a lot for me, and I had a very great time. But I was not being insolent nor disregarding western civilization. Today I can understand more clearly how great is Beethoven and Picasso and all the others. I can understand that because I believe that the western world has to do its own things while we do our own things. The one is not superior to the other. I don't accept the idea that there is a superior color. If a black man should say to me, "Our civilization is better than that other one," I will say to him, "No, don't play me that trick."

Once in independent Cameroun I was staying in a hotel where a young French couple was working. A man came, a Camerounese, in his big car, and he entered with his luggage. He said to the girl, "I've got a reservation here," and he dropped his luggage like that -- thump -- and told the girl, "Bring my luggage up." Well, that was a very weak girl. I didn't see whether she was white or black, but I was sitting there, and I said, "Look here, brother, you had better take your own luggage and go

up." He turned to me and said, "You are in Cameroun, do you know that? You are a stranger here. Things might happen to you that are not sweet." I answered, "I don't mind that, but you are going to take your own luggage and go up."

It just happened that while I was there, one of the papers had published my snap. You know, "Mr. Maunick is here, personality of the week," etc. And the newspaper had been put in each of the rooms. So this man took his luggage -- he was very reluctant to do it -- and went to his room. And the first thing he saw in the room was my photograph in the newspaper. And he ran down and said, "How are you, brother? You are a big man here." And I said, "Now look here, for 300 years they have been doing that to us. Are we going to start that again? You had better offer a whiskey to that lady." And that is what he did.

I don't refuse what comes from the exterior. But the only thing I ask for is the permission to look at my interior and be that man I am. Today if we say, "Black is beautiful," it can appear to some people that we are being insolent to know that we are beautiful. Why shouldn't we accept that? Because we were made in an image of ugliness. For instance, an important story by Sartre is "Black Orpheus." This is the forward to the anthology of Leopold Sedar Senghor. It was the first anthology to be written on black poetry, and Sartre offered to write the preface. And in it he says a very true thing. It is a white man who is speaking, and he says, "For example, you will say, 'As white as snow, black as the devil.' " The word "black" has a negative sense. Even speaking of a white man, you say, "He has got a black heart." In French it is better, "Il a le coeur noir y l'âme noire." We wanted to take the negative meaning from the word "black."

## V.

We came back to that original tree of Africa, and we learned to stand on our own feet. We did not only take the sap of the tree, but the branches, to help the tree to draw its own sap from the roots. Which means that black people coming from outside Africa have helped Africa to stand on its feet. This is why you will read about a man who is a revolutionary, but who did a lot of things for Africa. This man is Franz Fanon. Fanon is perhaps one of the great architects of the Algerian liberation. In fact, this man, who was a psychiatrist in Martinique, left Martinique and wrote his terrible book, "The Wretched of the Earth." And he joined the NLF [National Liberation Front] and he fought on the Arab side. He died in the United States, not from the war, but rather from a very bad illness. We people from the islands have not only taken from the western world, but we have taken from Africa. Not only do we want to give something to the western world, but we want to give something to Africa.

This university here is concentrating on Mauritius, and you are to be the library specialists in the United States about Mauritius. So I came here to speak about this man so that you will better know with what people you are dealing. It would be a fine thing if you could go to Mauritius, to see the right things with the right interpretation. You can see a Segar dance there, and merely regard it as a folklore subject: we are in colors, we dance, and we beat the drums. But that is not all there is to it. You must find out why there is a Segar there. Why do my people still dance the Segar, sing the Segar? I wrote in one of my poems, "My loins were born 17 years after my birthday," because it was the first time that I had danced the Segar. And then I understood why I had been so eager to learn the rhythm. When I went to Africa, I visited a Bamilike village. When I heard some drums, I said to myself, "Now, look here, man, that's a cousin of mine, I'm sure. He's beating that rhythm and I know it, it is familiar to me."

To really understand Mauritius, you have to know that Mauritius has a Negro background. It has got an Indian background, too, but the first people who were brought to Mauritius to work were Negroes, not Indians. After a certain time, the Negroes refused to do the work in the fields, and the English people who took over the French wanted to abolish what they called "slavery." So the Negroes were liberated. But the English who demanded the abolishment of slavery brought Indian coolies to Mauritius who were no better than slaves.

Now that we in Mauritius have come into the world, there is presented that question of violence. When you read your newspapers, you learn about certain islands and what is going on there. They are boiling kettles. Even in Africa, here in the United States, you get violence. What is the meaning of this? Sure, there is a negative sense to that violence. But one should first consider if there is not also a positive sense. My interpretation is that of most of our people. I'm not speaking of my own little self, but of a big crowd of people -- when you put all those Negroes together it makes a little big crowd. This violence is an offspring of our impatience to love. For centuries we have been forbidden to love. We love you -- it is as simple as that. We would never have opened our shores to the white man if we hadn't loved him. We gave him hospitality, and hospitality begins by loving. You can't be hospitable to me if you don't love me. But we were restricted from love because we had been taught that we were only things, the black man was considered as a thing. This is what Césaire called, "La chosefication du noir." Surely the black man was a thing, and how can a thing love? And this impatience to love has now grown into something very violent.

At a friend's place here in Los Angeles I saw a little Ashanti

statue of a man walking with a stick in his hand and a snake on his head. What is the meaning of this man walking with a snake on his head? Among the blacks, the Ashanti say that the snake does not bite unless it is provoked to do so. This is why some of the Ashanti people walk with snakes on their heads. We know full well that there is much negativeness in violence, but before condemning it fully, one must understand its cause. When you go through African literature, this may present a problem. You will see a lot of violence, a lot of refusal. Before we can say "yes," we have to refuse, because we were taught refusal. It is very important not to forget that before the white man came, we had the land and they had the bible. Today, for most of us, we have the bible and they have the land.

Have we been doing these things only to be Negroes, to be black people? I think not. It is our adventure. It is perhaps the last thing you would keep from us.

And here at the end of the small hours is my virile  
prayer  
that I may hear neither laughter nor crying, my eyes  
upon this city which I prophesy as beautiful.  
Give me the sorcerer's savage faith  
give my hands the power to mould  
give my soul the temper of the sword  
I will stand firm. Make of my head a prow  
and of myself make neither a father  
nor a brother nor a son  
but the father, the brother, the son  
do not make me a husband, but the lover of this  
unique people

Make me rebellious against all vanity but docile to its  
genius  
like the fist of our extended arm  
Make me the steward of its blood  
make me the trustee of its rancour  
make me a man of ending  
make me a man of beginning  
make me a man of harvesting  
but also make me a man of sowing

make of me its executioner  
the time has come to gird my loins like a man of  
courage

but at the execution let my heart preserve me from all  
hate

do not make of me that man of hate for whom I have  
only hate  
I was born of this unique race  
yet knowing my tyrannical love you know  
it is not by hatred of other races that I prosecute for  
mine.  
All that I would wish is  
to answer the universal hunger  
the universal thirst. . . .

[ Césaire "Return to my Native Land" ]

## VI.

### Questions and Answers

Q: I would like to know what your definition of civilization is as opposed to ways, customs, and traditions?

A: As for Negritude itself, we think of civilization as that which belongs to the people, not only the outer side but the inner side, also. The white man felt he was bringing civilization to us by saying, "Don't worry what you are, be like us, do our thing." This is the meaning I have of civilization. It is not only what we show, but what we are. Very often, too much of this has been taken only to be tradition and custom. I have not been able to read Leon Voton Damasse to you, because he writes in French. Together with Césaire and Leopold Senghor, he helped to organize the Negritude movement in Paris when they were all students there. One of Damasse's main points in a book called "Black Label" is explained in a poem. In a very cunning way and with some humor he tells what he thinks civilization is. His mother would tell him, "Don't think your fork is a toothpick. Learn to use that fork. You must not cut bread with a knife -- you must break bread. You must not play with children who are not Christians. These things do not become a real civilized man." At the end of his poem, he says, "Leave this to the Negro. We don't do that, we civilized Negroes." He also says, "My mother wanted a civilized boy, wanted a song very do, very re, very me, very fa, very sol, very la, very si, very do. She wanted a song do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, si, do. 'What have I heard? You have not been to your piano lessons, to your violin lessons? You want a banjo? Did I really hear you say banjo? Now look here, you must understand that here in this house, there is no 'ban,' no 'jo,' no 'gui,' no 'tar.' Leave this to the Negroes.' " This is where the difference lies.

Q: What did you mean by a difference between liberation and freedom?

A: This is one of the questions I have often been asked while I have been in the United States this time. I think that freedom is just like eternity. We tend to eternity, we tend to freedom. We are always trying to liberate



ourselves to reach freedom. But freedom is something we can't obtain as a whole. I am not free, you are not free, but you have liberated yourself of many things and you are going to liberate yourself today, and again tomorrow, from many things. I do not really believe in what is called "independence" in the former colonized countries, because one is only independent when one has enough money to be economically independent. For instance, on my island, we plant sugar cane. Then there comes a cyclone, the fields are down, and what do we do? We go to the United Nations Organization or we go to the Red Cross to borrow money. This is not being independent. But we have been liberating ourselves from certain things. So that today or tomorrow we can do different things on my island besides planting sugar cane. The colonizer came and planted sugar and that was all, so we thought that we were going through the 20th century, the 30th, the 50th, planting sugar. We must liberate ourselves from this in order to become independent.

I am liberating myself from many things all the time, even from hating the white man. Because when I was kicked by those white people when I was a boy, I must confess, I hated them. And my mother, who had some white blood in her, told me to hate the white man because she, herself, had been refused by them. She didn't get a name. She lived all her life through with the name of her mother. Her mother was good to make love with than French man, but not good enough for his name. In another poem I have said, "Though, knowing these things, the white man who made love to my grandmother refused to give his name to my grandmother. My mother was able to marry my father who was the son of an Indian coolie coming from India. What do you want me to do about this, except to laugh at the crime and build my body stronger than bereavement?" I want to liberate myself from that. And the strange thing is that I have been liberating myself, not by learning who the white man is, but by learning who the black man is. This is why today, even in Africa, poets and creators are considered to be somewhat dangerous.

Q: Is the difference of languages between the different people on your little island a problem?

A: This is an important question, not only just for my island, but for all the people in Africa. For example, when I gave a talk at the Black Studies Center at UCLA, I was asked, "Why do you write in French?" or "Why do you write in English? Why don't you write in what is called a 'vernacular'?" We must be honest. There is not one single language that would serve the black continent. If you visit Africa, you soon learn that within the same city you get many languages. You might hear that Lingala, or Swahili, for example, could well serve the Congo basin. But it will be a foreign language to some of the people who live there. When I went to school, it was very

difficult for me to master the English and French languages. Now that I have done it, I am not going to do away with them. These are both great languages of communication. And if I am going to bring most of what I am to the world, and explain myself to the world, these languages are a weapon you have given me, and I am going to use them against you. Some countries in Africa have wanted to use their own currency in the French-speaking countries, but it has been completely unsuccessful. These are little details that some nationalists would take to please the people, to please the mob. They take cover behind this sort of thing, but the most important things they do not do. Today in most African schools, while you are learning French, you are also learning your own language. Why not? It is very important, because most of the traditions will be learned in your own language. But we must not discard our "in" language, and we must not discard the "out" language. Because I don't see these people from Africa sitting at the United Nations Organization, and everyone speaking their own language and asking for an interpreter.

I did not mention that when I was in college I concentrated on Shakespeare. I like Shakespeare. But one thing reading Shakespeare taught me was that I had to read him in his own language to really understand him and, also, to learn something about myself. Somewhere he says, "Tomorrow, tomorrow, and tomorrow creeps in that petty pace, from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time, and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death." Do you realize that a Negro can't dig that? We don't take tomorrow and tomorrow as leading us to dust. We think that the human being is a miracle. Every day he gets up, there is the sun. He travels towards light, not towards death. In the western world, death is dealt with too much in the wrong way, according to us. You take death as "our yesterdays lighting fools on the way to dusty death." No! all our yesterdays were great! If we stand on our feet together today, it is because we have yesterdays. Death is not our goal, it is not our aim. We know it exists, but we are not going to play the intellectual and just ponder over death. We want to live. We have been taught too much about death to accept it. We know what is death, we have had the experience of death, but in us there is the inner life, the sun.

When I was in college I didn't want to learn English, because the English possessed my island. I hated the English people, the English colonizer. My schoolmaster said, "Look here, Edouard, you are always playing in the English class. Why is that?" And I told him, "I don't like English, I don't want to learn it. I don't like the English people." He said, "All right. Do you want to tell them that?" And I answered, "Yes." "Then," he said, "learn their language so they will understand you." We cannot speak Swahili if we want the world to hear us.

Q: There has been much plundering of the resources in a given area in Africa, such as the diamonds, or there is only one crop planted, such as on Mauritius. Do you see a future for pan-African movements, of finding places to produce things that are needed and being able to overcome the walls that have arisen under the Colonial system between the people?

A: There has been one place in Africa where we have been taught a lesson. In this country they have refused to play the game, and they have gone back to poverty, to more difficulty. The country is that of Tanzania. We don't want to accept difficulties now in our so set, so cold, so independent cultures. But the people of Tanzania have been taught not only to do their own thing but to do it in their own way. They have been taught to go back to the land if the land has to be worked in order for the nation to live. What are we doing in Mauritius? We have 22 ministers, 60 people sitting in the legislative council. We have a Prime Minister. We have embassies all around the world, but we have no money. We have only chased the colonialist out in order to take his place. We have the head of the supreme court, the Chief Judge, and do you know how he is clothed? He has got a wig, he is clothed in red, and he has a sort of scepter in his hand. What is that? Let us sell that scepter and let's do something else. Use the money for the wigs to do something for us.

It may sound extreme, but I believe in pan-Africanism. I do not believe that we are going to die, particularly after all of these years of fighting. But I am hating some of the African politicians today. We have been called a retarded people, but we are not retarded, we are a late people. These politicians are making us a retarded people, because they are working on the same old patterns. Africa will exist. Patrice Lumumba of the Congo saw that an empire of the Congo existed before colonialism, and he wanted to reorganize that part of Africa into that sort of thing. It would have lived, but he was killed.

There are many ways and means to do these things. They are very difficult and we don't accept all of them today because we are still in a way a colonizing people. Today the responsibility is not on the owning nations. It is on our own selves. Information in Africa must be true information. The people must know the facts, and they are not being given the facts. There is a sort of elite, there is a sort of bourgeoisie now leading in Africa in the Third World. And the miserable thing about it is that it is going to take another one or two generations to change all these things. And what I write about in my books, and what people bigger than I write about, is that these present generations are being sacrificed, and we have not the right to sacrifice them. The people of today have to have their share of life, of liberty, of freedom, of liberation. When you think from what darkness we come, then you know that one day we will succeed in all.

We have come a very dark way. It can work, but politically things must change.

Q: What do you believe is the future of Negritude?

A: When I speak of Negritude, it does not mean that I think we should go back to black traditions, that we must remain in that museum. When we have recovered our soul, that self of ours, then we have to work with the world as it goes on. I am not with those people who say they do not want refrigerators in Africa because refrigerators belong to the industrial world. When you go into the markets and see the meat, you know we need refrigerators. We must work toward compromise. History, civilizations, nations, have to learn to cope with certain situations. If we have to take, we are going to take. But we are not only going to take. We want the world to take from us also. We have something to say to the world. We must industrialize ourselves, but only to a certain degree. For instance, we must not do such as the United States has done, in some of their big cities, such as the smog in Los Angeles. We must not get this type of thing, because we know what trees mean, what space means. We have the cosmic touch, and this is what we can bring to the world. But I am convinced that we will not be able to go on alone. I am no prophet, but perhaps in a hundred years, if the values of the western world and our values are used together -- and not just the western values, as it has always been -- then I think the world will succeed together. In this way, we may be able to prevent war.

Q: Do you feel that you are working for the liberation of the black people through your writing as much as you would working as an Africanist politically?

A: I draw no difference between being an activist and being a writer. I suppose in my writing I am working literally for my own liberation and for the liberation for everyone. There are so many kinds of liberation that I can't stand up and say that my own is the best. For me, to be a poet is no glory -- it is a task. I have the responsibility of writing. I don't say that I have not written love poems for Diana; I have done that, and I'm still doing it. I speak of love in my poems. But even writing about these things, I always bring them back to that self of mine that is the self of many others in the world. I am being an activist in my own way. We are many bricks to build one building in which we are going to be happy. Perhaps somewhere I am mistaken, but when I consider the results of what I've done up to now in Africa and among other people, I can say that I must go on this way. I do not reject other means, but I despise cheap violence. We have been brought to this point where we have to be violent. The forces working against us have discovered that they can make laws against us and attract world opinion against us when they see the results of our violence. This only pushes us to greater violence. Just as when we worked in the fields, they said, "Let these Negroes sing their blues. As long as they sing they

are not dangerous." But they did not know the blues contained messages. Now today they say, "Let them be violent and the world will see that they are really savages. And everyone will be against them." If you come to me to speak terms, we are going to speak. But I must warn you that if you are violent against me, I am going to be violent against you. I am not going to come and be violent first, because then you are going to quell me, and that is that. I am not a separatist. I have lived violence, and I can be very violent, and be sure that what I write is violent. Outside observers can say that this is only literature, just as they once said that the blues were only songs. We know what we are writing. Today, the French people are just realizing what Césaire did for the independence. I don't say that the pen is mightier than the sword; I will use the sword when there is no more ink in my pen.

There is a man for whom I have great respect. He is Leopold Senghor. But I am fighting what he writes today. We are very close friends, but he knows that I'm against it. We write to each other. I don't accept his reason for closing the University of Dakar, which is because the Sorbonne is closed. That is being too Frenchy. He wrote once books and poems that served our cause. Do you know what is Banania? Banania is a French product. It is some sort of crumbled chocolate that all the white people take in the morning and then they believe they are strong for all the day. And on this Banania there is a painting of a Negro with a big cup, and he is smiling. "When you take Banania, you will be as strong as a Negro, and you will laugh as a Negro, it is all right." Most of the colonialists used this term also to insult the Negro. If you were a man weighing 40 or 60 kilos -- oh, there is 60 kilos of Banania going by. It was a terrible mockery. Two months ago a lady in Italy insulted me by calling me Banania. In Italy she did that! But Senghor, in one of his former poems, said, "I'm going to tear all the Banania smiles from all the walls of the world." It seemed fantastic to take a stand against this. Senghor came to New York when he was President of the Senegalese government. And some American Negroes, who were concerned in their own way with the Banania smile, asked him what his stand was as far as the black question was concerned in this country. He gave a terrible answer: "I am on an official visit. I can't answer."

I personally take great interest in what is taking place in this country. Though being against violence, I understand it. I understand the problems of the black people here, and I am going to share them. If I had not a wife and a son, I would have come to this country and worked with the black people. I wanted to help the black people in South Africa, but they showed me the way out. They put me on a plane and said, "Go home." I will tell you bluntly that I wanted to piss where the white man only has the right to piss. I wanted to be bussed by white busses. I sat



on benches where it was written, "For white men only." When the police came, I only answered in French. But then they discovered I had a British passport, and I was a subject of her Majesty the Queen, and they said, "Shut up and go away, if you don't want us to send you like Mr. Mandela out on an island and let you die there." I know all these things. But I do not have definite answers to the problems now taking place. If Mr. So-and-So, if he is a Negro, comes to me today in the United States of America and says he has the key to the problem, I will not be able to accept him, whether his answer is non-violent or violent, whatever be his key, whether it is gold or rust. I believe things progress while they are being done. We have seen that in Africa with the French people, we have seen this with the English people. If I have to use violence, I will, but I believe you will have brought me to this violence. I, personally, will not begin to shoot you, but if you come in the door to kill my child, I am going to kill you. You walk on the belly of my mother, then I am going to walk on the belly of your mother. I am not going to take it that because I am a Christian and you stop me, I am going to do nothing.

I have spoken to many African leaders and know them. I do disagree with them, and I do agree with them. I have not the answer. Who has got the answer? Even those who think they have the answer, today they are trembling. When you send a man to a court, he wants to say something, but no one wants to hear him. He continues to speak because he has been shut down for years and years. And you put a thing in his mouth, and you bind his hands, you bind him to a chair in a court. I can't accept that. And if his brothers are violent outside, I understand that they are violent. I understand the violence at Kent State University or anywhere, whether the people are Negroes or white. It is not only the Negroes who are black in some circumstances, you know that. I am not an activist, but one thing I am not going to accept is that you treat me as I was before, because I've become someone else. In fact, I've reintegrated my own self, and I'm very proud to be that one. I am not going to be insulted and tell you I don't want your music. But when I play jazz, don't break everything in the house. Just listen to my music.

Q: In your country, as in all the islands in the world, there is the problem of population. Have you any solutions to suggest?

A: Mauritius is a very tiny island, and today we are nearing one million in population. The government, I know, has been paying couples not to make children. If in one year you succeed in not having a child, you receive 25 rupees. But it was discovered that, as it is a multi-racial society, while people of African descent were using the methods not to make children, the Indians were making children, to have more voters, you know. And it became a political trick.

But first of all you must go back to the root of the thing. The first constituent is that the people of these countries must learn to become those people that they were made to be. My father used to say, "Because we have nothing, and we were made to have nothing, the only pleasure we have is the pleasure of the poor -- to go to bed with our wives." These people were educated to be nothing, so they did their thing -- and more times than it was necessary, perhaps. So they say, "These Negroes, always like to make love." It's not true, you know. We are not champions. It is only a question of circumstance. And I think that if these people are brought to taste life in its entirety, they will themselves find a clue. But I don't believe when you offer a couple 25 rupees in a year because they haven't made any children that it is going to work.

As for the Africans, themselves, they have worked on population control, they have gone into the villages, and there are big campaigns. But there is another woe besides making too many children. There is another woe: leaving the fields, leaving the country, leaving the villages to come to the city. This is not a defect of the African. It is only because he has been told that in the city there are lights, there is electricity, there is cinema, there is culture. He has not been shown that the village is perhaps more important than the city. That what is taking place in the city is exterior; that the banks cannot work if the fields have not yielded something. This is also a question of education. He was made to despise his village. People react so violently towards what is black, what is in the Third World. I have a son, a lovely son, I love him very much, and so do the parents of my wife. But when we look at TV and when he perspires, the father of my wife does not understand how Negroes perspire like that. Transpiration, you see. "I would have accepted that music, but there is too much transpiration." Little things like that, little details like that, have made a big tale about us. And I suppose as we must be educated in certain things, so our educators must also be educated in certain other things. Don't kill what is natural to these people and expect to replace it by other values. You know that it is impossible for them to obtain other values overnight. For then these people are put in a more terrible state than they were before. And I think that if certain circumstances are eradicated, something can be worked out. I have seen it happen in India. They have those things over the Touchables and the Untouchables; they have those things that have been developed by the English. Because while these people were fighting being Touchables or Untouchables, the English were governing. Divide to rule. They can devise their own ways, but it all depends what happens to their own currency, to their own economy. People need to be fed. Having children is a question of economy. It is a problem of concentric circles . . . vicious, concentric circles.

Q: Do you think mass media has a good effect in Africa?

A: Yes, sure. Because I think that if mass media is well used in the western world to show who is the African, who is the black man, and it brings a better understanding of the black man, then it is good. This is the first use I would make of mass media. You know, I worked on TV, but now I will only work on radio. Because I have discovered that in Africa the transistor is something miraculous. I am distasteful of TV in Africa because it is, first of all, too expensive. Don't create additional needs for these people. The second thing is that TV is being used by the heads of government for their own purposes. Do you know that I went to Congo once and they have the TV there. In one day 17 times I saw Fulbert Youlou, who is the president of Congo [Brazzaville], on the TV. They are using this for their own campaign, their own views. So it is internal TV. I have also seen, of course, all sorts of TV being worked in the right way -- for example, for an anti-water pollution campaign. There is a hut in the middle of the village, a TV set is put there, and people assemble around the TV because TV is a new thing. And it is an occasion to give them a very hard lesson, through a thing for which they have some interest. This is what I have said in Africa; but I am taken to be a very dangerous person over there because they want a film of Yves Montand. And that is bad. They show Paris, the "Light City," when, as I told you, a man was so filled with Paris, and Paris, and Paris that when he wanted to go there, and they refused, he committed suicide. They don't need these things.

Cover: Baga Sculpture (Guinea). Design by Institute Art Program (LVV).



